

TOAST SPEECH BY PRESIDENT HALIMAH YACOB AT THE STATE BANQUET IN HONOUR OF PRESIDENT OF THE LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC BOUNNHANG VORACHITH, WEDNESDAY, 9 MAY 2018, 7.15PM, AT THE ISTANA

Your Excellency, President Bounnhang Vorachith

Mrs Khammeung Vorachith

Excellencies

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

A very warm welcome to President Bounnhang, Madam Khammeung and the delegation. I am delighted to host President Bounnhang's first visit to Singapore as President of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. But in fact President Bounnhang is an old friend of Singapore. In 2001, President Bounnhang visited Singapore as Prime Minister. I was told the orchid that was named after His Excellency during that visit was recently in full bloom and put on public display at the National Orchid Garden just a week ago.

Likewise, the excellent ties and warm friendship between Singapore and Laos have blossomed over the years. Our two countries will be celebrating the 45th anniversary of bilateral diplomatic relations next year. As a gesture of friendship, I have arranged to send to Your Excellency a cutting from your orchid plant. I am confident that the bilateral relations between our two countries will continue to flourish in the years to come.

Singapore and Laos cooperate in many areas. Our two countries exchange regular visits at all levels. I have fond memories of Laos from my last visit in 2014 as Speaker of Parliament to attend the 35th ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Association's General Assembly in Vientiane. Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith visited Singapore recently for the 32nd ASEAN Summit. My predecessor Dr Tony Tan made a State Visit to Laos in January last year.

Singapore has been a strong supporter of Laos' human resource development. More than 13,200 Lao officials have participated in the Singapore Cooperation Programme since 1992. This includes a delegation of 19 senior Lao officials, led by Vice-Minister of Natural Resources and Environment Mdm Bounkham

Vorachith, who were in Singapore for a one-month English Language course in August last year.¹ I hope that it was an enriching experience for them. Singapore will continue to support key Lao development priorities through the sharing of best practices and experiences in ongoing capacity building courses, in areas such as accounting, audit, healthcare and tourism.

Our technical cooperation goes beyond classroom-style training courses. Today, two MOUs were concluded on education as well as environment and water matters. The first MOU strengthens technical cooperation through increased exchanges between the schools of our two countries. The second MOU will enhance cooperation on trans-boundary threats including climate change, and air and water pollution.

I am happy to note that people-to-people exchanges between our two countries are also growing. Many Singapore youths have travelled to Laos to participate in community projects. Singapore hosted Laotian youths in various exchange programmes including the Temasek Foundation Specialists' Community Action and Leadership Exchange (TF SCALE), where 15 students from the Lao University of Health Science engaged in a holistic learning and cross-cultural sharing experience with their peers in Temasek Polytechnic.

Laos is one of the fastest growing economies in the region. Average growth rates have been 7% or more over the past decade. Singapore companies see the strong growth potential in Laos, and are keen to step up cooperation in areas where their niche capabilities align with Lao's priorities. Two large Singapore business delegations visited Laos last year to explore business opportunities. There is interest to explore more investments in logistics, education, agriculture, real estate and hospitality.

Singapore and Laos have shared interests in enhancing regional cooperation and connectivity, and in maintaining ASEAN's relevance and centrality. Our two countries have worked closely together towards concluding the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which would help to boost trade flows along with other regional economic frameworks.

The ASEAN Smart Cities Network launched under Singapore's ASEAN Chairmanship will bring our cities closer together as we try to achieve smart and sustainable urbanisation. Laos' nomination of Vientiane and Luang Prabang to join the Network will add value to this regional ecosystem. I am confident that these efforts will also contribute to economic growth and socio-economic development in Laos.

¹ Mdm Bounkham Vorachith is Bounnhang's daughter.

As a close neighbour, friend and fellow ASEAN member, Singapore will continue to work closely with Laos, both bilaterally and within ASEAN, to further broaden and deepen our relationship. On this note, I would like to once again extend my warmest welcome to Your Excellency. I hope that you and your delegation will have a fruitful visit.

Your Excellency President Bounnhang Vorachith,

Mrs Khammeung Vorachith,

Distinguished Guests

May I now invite you to rise and join me in a toast to:

- The good health and success of President, and Madam Khammeung;
- The progress and prosperity of the people of Laos; and
- The close friendship between Singapore and Laos.

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